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ABSTRACT

To understand student attrition, Mercer County Community College has developed a complementary information system based on: (1) a computerized tracking system following enrollment patterns by semester of entering class; (2) surveys of the nonreturning student populations each semester; and (3) retrieval of demographic and biographic characteristics of the nonreturning students from the computer files. Findings from this information system indicate that a significant proportion of the nonreturning student statistic has been due to intermittent enrollment, change in personal plans, and completion of personal objectives, rather than due to failure of the student or college. Such revised understandings of attrition have consequences in terms of measuring accountability, predicting nonreturn, defining the community college dropout, and developing action programs and services to meet student attrition. (Author)

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THEY DO COME BACK!

STUDENT ATTRITION AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Student attrition has long been a problem among all types of colleges and universities. As an open door institution, the community college has been particularly concerned with understanding student attrition. The assumption, as yet unvarified nor totally accepted, is that maintaining a minimum attrition rate is a measure of accountability for the college. What constitutes a minimum acceptance level for attrition, however, has not been agreed upon by society or by education. Thus, the individual institution usually has had to decide its own operational criteria for success or failure in student attrition.

The phenomenon of student attrition may be brought into better focus by noting several particular objectives or intentions of the two-year college. The community college was established, among other reasons, to meet a variety of expressed community needs not supplied by other agencies. Through its capacity to eliminate economic, geographic, and social barriers of education, the two-year college has provided the opportunity for competence for many previously excluded and diverse populations. There also is the commendable aim of the two-year college to salvage residual but undeveloped talent, or to make it possible for late bloomers to repair certain academic deficiences before producing to their fullest capacity. Here again is evidence of a situation whereby the two-year college, particularly the open door community college, has made itself potentially ripe for student attrition. In its attempts to cast farther the net of post-secondary education so as to identify, catch, and bring available talent within the scope of education, wherever it may be found, the community college has discovered that the art of casting is difficult and that people can and do slip from the net.

The Study of Student Attrition

Numerous studies have been undertaken to learn the extent of student attrition nationally, at the state level, and within individual schools. Indeed, most educational institutions can present figures to indicate the extent of student persistence or student attrition, no matter how such terms might be operationalized. Clark (1960) found that a total of one of every six entering full time students eventually graduates. On data presented from the directors of the American Association of Community/Junior Colleges, Thorton (1966) notes a national average rate of 50% student attrition between the first and second years of the two-year college. City University of New York has reported a 62% one-year retention rate for freshmen entering in September 1970 through its open door admissions programs (Healy, 1973). And, the NORCAL Research Group, a consortium of California junior colleges, in reviewing national statistics over an eight year period, found that sophomore enrollments were approximately 48% of freshman enrollments (MacMillan and Kester, 1973).

Mercer County Community College has attempted to understand student attrition more fully, as it resolves to adopt an accountability measure for student persistence. The gross number or proportion of drop-outs, whether operationalized by academic periods or academic years, cannot supply the complete information. To meet the information needs then, the College has developed a computerized tracking system which follows student enrollment patterns by semester of entering class. This tracking system, developed through the facilities and manpower of the College's Computer Center, enables data retrieval for both full time entering students and part time entering students for each semester.

Student persistence in each entering class is monitored for the next six semesters according to the number of students in each subsequent semester who return full time, return part time, and are re-admitted either full or part time after a stop-out period. The tracking system also includes the trace of a

student's change of major field within the College from one curriculum to another. A cumulative figure records the number and percent of the entering class attending the College with each semester. In addition, student persistence for each entering class is monitored to record students who do not return in subsequent semesters, including those who do not return for reasons of graduation, transfer, or dismissal. A cumulative figure records the number and percent of the entering class non-returning to the College with each semester.

The system produces output generated for all students as well as for various subgroups of the population of each entering class, such as freshmen versus sophomores, transfer program versus career program students, or according to each individual curriculum. The system is designed to monitor enrollment patterns for six semesters, in order to provide for the student who might temporarily interrupt studies before being re-admitted or who would not complete the two-year degree program within the normal four semester provision. In each semester's output, the entering class figure becomes the number or base upon which all percentage distributions are calculated for each subsequent semester.

Table 1 is an example of the generated output from the tracking system for student persistence for the full time entering class of Fall 1971 (N = 1290), traced through the Spring of 1974. According to the data, 75% of the full time entering class for that Fall 1971 semester returned to the College the next semester in a full time status, and another 5% returned in a part time status, for a total attending figure of 80%. That figure then changed over the subsequent four semesters to reflect persistence, attrition, and re-admittance patterns.

Insert Table 1

As a complement to the computer facilitated tracking system of student enrollment patterns, the College has surveyed its population of non-returning

TABLE 1

STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN AND MODE OF LEAVING FULL TIME STATUS

BY YEAR OF ENTERING CLASS[a]

	ALL STUDENTS	CLASS ENTERING FALL, 1971					
	SPRG 71	FALL 71	SPRG 72	FALL 72	SPRG 73	FALL 73	SPRG 74
PERCENT ENTERED		100.00 1290					
PERCENT RETURNING F-T			75.40 973	50.10 647	43.30 559	8.60 111	6.20 80
PERCENT RETURNING P-T				1.60 21	2.80 37	1.70 23	3.40 45
PERCENT F-T TO P-T			5.00 65	4.90 64	2.00 27	5.10 66	1.60 21
PERCENT P-T TO F-T				.70 10	.70 10	.80 11	.80 11
PERCENT RE-ADMIT F-T				1.50 20	1.00 13	1.80 24	.60 9
PERCENT RE-ADMIT P-T				.50 7	1.10 15	1.20 16	1.60 21
PERCENT TOTAL ATTENDING		100.00 1290	80.40 1038	59.60 769	51.20 661	19.40 251	14.40 187
PERCENT GRADUATED			.20 3	3.50 46	.30 5	21.00 271	.70 10
PRECENT TRANSFERRED			1.70 22	3.00 39	.20 3	1	.10 2
PERCENT NON-RETURN F-T			17.50 227	13.40 174	6.50 84	10.30 134	3.10 41
PERCENT NON-RETURN P-T				1.70 23	2.70 36	2.40 31	2.70 35
PERCENT DISMISSED				1.00 14	.60 8	1.00 13	.40 6

[a]This table is a typed approximation of the actual computer output.

students each semester. The survey is designed to provide empirically derived data concerning reasons for non-return and present characteristics of these former students.[1] To coincide with the survey instruments, a computer program was developed to enable data from the questionnaire to be tabulated, cross-referenced, and printed out by the College's computer. The output elements of this computer program were designed to print out the individual items, the alternative responses, the actual responses, the sub-total of responses to each item, and the sub-total of non-response to each item. Through such a program, information can be accessed specific to various curricula, departments, or categories of students.

Access to the Student History File and Registration File has enabled the College to retrieve output concerning various demographic and biographical characteristics of the non-returning students for contrast with other populations. Such generated output thus gives the College a third complementary source of information in its efforts to understand student attrition at the College.

Findings on Attrition

Through such empirical investigations, the College has come to revised understandings and expectations with respect to its student attrition. The persistence data for the College have been viewed with respect to the phenomenon of intermittent enrollment in post-secondary education. That is, a number of students and, in fact, an increasing percentage of students, are pursuing what would traditionally be defined as an erratic or irregular pattern of enrollment. Accordingly, the student attends one semester, drops out for one or several semesters to work or travel, and then returns to the College in subsequent semester.[2]

Table 2 enables an examination of the degree to which intermittent enrollment has occurred for the full time student populations at the College, with the data derived from the computerized tracking system. From the non-

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Insert Table 2

TABLE 2

Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the Attrition of Full Time Student Enrollment by Year of Entering Class for Fall and Spring Semesters, 1969 through 1974 Mercer County Community College

Entering Class:	Semester Headcount Enrollment	Return Succeeding Semester Full-Time	Return Succeeding Semester Part-Time	Non-Return Succeeding Semester		Re-Admittance in Subsequent Semester(s)[a]			Total Non-Return To-Date[b]	
Fall 1969	1119	769	113	237	21%	147	(6)	13%	90	8%
Spring 1970	213	136	16	61	29%	32	(6)	15%	29	14%
Fall 1970	1151	798	94	259	23%	159	(5)	14%	100	9%
Spring 1971	250	124	29	97	39%	44	(5)	18%	53	21%
Fall 1971	1290	973	65	252	20%	125	(4)	10%	127	10%
Spring 1972	234	121	23	90	38%	14	(3)	6%	76	32%
Fall 1972	1382	998	95	289	21%	79	(2)	6%	210	15%
Spring 1973	274	155	23	96	35%	2	(1)	1%	94	34%
Fall 1973	1374	1005	55	314	23%	-	(0)	-	314	23%
TOTAL	7287	5079	513	1695	23%	602		8%	1093	15%

[a]The number of subsequent semesters for each entering class is in parentheses. Re-admittance may be as full time or part time student.

[b]Figure based upon the non-return data of succeeding semester, less number of students from the original entering class re-admitted in subsequent semesters.

return rate for the succeeding semester, the number of students re-admitted to the College in subsequent semesters is subtracted, thus arriving at a total non-return figure to date. The data indicate that approximately one of every two students who did not return to the College for the succeeding semester, have eventually returned as re-admitted students in subsequent semesters. For example, 252 of the total 1290 entering full time students in the Fall of 1971, or 20% of that entering class, did not return in the succeeding semester. Of the 252 non-returning students, however, 125 persons, or 10% of the total entering class population, were re-admitted to the College in the four succeeding semesters.[3]

Similarly, examination of re-admittance for the part time student population (see Table 3) indicates that approximately two of every ten students who did not return to the College for the succeeding semester, later

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Insert Table 3

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were re-admitted in subsequent semesters. For example, 671 of the total 1096 entering part time students in the Fall of 1971, or 61% of that entering class, did not return in the succeeding semester. Of that non-return figure, however, 119 students were re-admitted to the College in the four subsequent semesters.

The intermittent enrollment patterns closely parallel findings from our surveys of non-returning students. Approximately 25% of the respondents from the non-returning student populations of Fall 1973 and of Spring 1974 indicated they planned to return to the College at a later date. And, the data indicate that approximately 75% of these students plan to continue their education in the future, either at the College or some other post-secondary institution.

Further revised understandings of the student attrition at the College have come from the surveys of non-returning students. Results from the same surveys indicate that the vast majority of the non-returning students from these two semesters attended the College with a particular objective

TABLE 3
Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the Attrition of Part Time Student Enrollment
by Year of Entering Class for Fall and Spring Semesters, 1970 through 1974
Mercer County Community College

Entering Class:	Semester Headcount Enrollment	Return Succeeding Semester Full-Time	Return Succeeding Semester Part-Time	Non-Return Succeeding Semester		Re-Admittance in Subsequent Semester(s)[a]		Total Non-Return To-Date[b]	
Spring 1970	727	187	30	510	70%	91	(5) 13%	419	58%
Fall 1970	1178	484	34	660	56%	168	(5) 14%	492	42%
Spring 1971	661	162	33	466	71%	79	(5) 12%	387	59%
Fall 1971	1096	393	32	671	61%	119	(4) 11%	552	50%
Spring 1972	499	118	36	345	69%	50	(3) 10%	295	59%
Fall 1972	1326	548	39	739	56%	75	(2) 6%	664	50%
Spring 1973	828	162	41	625	76%	17	(1) 2%	608	73%
Fall 1973	1273	446	36	791	62%	-	(0) -	791	62%
TOTAL	7588	2500	281	4807	63%	599	8%	4208	55%

[a] The number of subsequent semesters for each entering class is in parentheses. Re-admittance may be as full time or part time student.

[b] Figure based upon the non-return data of succeeding semester, less number of students from the original entering class re-admitted in subsequent semesters.

in mind. Characteristically, the major objective for attending the College was preparation for an intended occupation or further education. Over 80% of the non-returning students from both semesters who were employed indicated that the College had prepared them well or very well for that position. Similarly, over 80% of those former students who were pursuing further education indicated that the College had prepared them well or very well for that education.

Conclusions & Implications

Through extensive enrollment tracking and survey efforts, this College has come to a clearer understanding of its own student enrollment patterns. The results of various information systems indicate that a significant proportion of the non-returning student statistic at the College has been due to the phenomenon of intermittent enrollment, change in personal plans, and completion of personal objectives by the student, rather than due to failure of the student or of the College. Consequently, the proportion of the enrolled student population who withdrew from the College should be compared with the proportion of that population who eventually return to the College and with the proportion of that population who indicate the completion of objectives. The efforts of the College, therefore, have appropriately shifted toward a concentration upon reducing whatever degree of dissatisfaction is expressed about the College by such student populations and, ultimately, to set as a goal a minimal proportion level for the negative reasons which students have for non-return.

Mercer County Community College, or any other institution, could not realistically set, as a goal, a student persistence rate of 100% for each semester. Given the variables of college attendance discerned through our information systems and the immense complexity of the pushes and pulls which affect the student's desires and abilities to enroll, it becomes debatable as

to what is a good or poor student persistence rate. It has become obvious, however, at least to this College, that a rate of 100% student persistence should not be set, even as a goal. The efforts of the community college, therefore, should shift from aiming for 100% student persistence through assorted action programs, to isolating such pushes and pulls and so studying their related effects upon the decisions of students to enroll and to persist in that enrollment.

The careful monitoring of student re-admittance data also is an area where attention should be placed, rather than with the goal of 100% student persistence. Such data reflect students who really were satisfied with the educational experience received at the College, but who decided to postpone their studies temporarily. While institutions monitor drop-out data through some operationalized definitions and procedures, so should they monitor data on the drop-back student. A consistent reduction in the re-admittance figures could reflect more cause for concern for the college than a sudden increase in the attrition figures.

For all practical purposes, the results of our information system confirm that drop-out is not an appropriate term to signify students who do not return to the community college before completion of the intended program. Most students will continue in their pursuit or will return at a later time to complete their own educational goals. Furthermore, many community college students apparently have, as their educational goal, the completion of only one or several courses and never intend to earn a degree from the college. These students are not drop-outs when they finish the courses they intended to complete, because they have accomplished their goals. Others are not drop-outs because, after working for a few terms or traveling, they return to the college and without having forsaken their educational goals. If, as some argue, the community college should play a

significant role in helping students develop viable life goals, then findings from our surveys suggest that a community college may have contributed towards such goal development even among its non-returning student population.

A definite indicator of effectiveness for the College always has been the expressed satisfaction of its graduates with the preparation received for employment or further education. The College has not identified as a similar indicator of effectiveness, the expressed satisfaction of students who do not complete a degree or program with the preparation received for employment or further education. Perhaps wrongly, as realized from the surveys of non-returning students, it has been assumed that a college could not be expected to be judged on the basis of the reactions of its non-returning students toward what was presumed to be incomplete preparation.

Findings from our information systems have contradicted the stereotyped image of the non-returning student as a marginal student with a history of academic failure and frustration. That image should be discarded. Similarly, the findings contradict the image of the drop-out as a consequential failure and non-productive element of the society. The vast majority of the College's non-returning students expressed a definite and positive reason for attending the College, wanted to continue education either on the job or at another institution, and felt that college education was essential or important.

For this College, at least, there does not appear to be any such phenomenon as the potential non-returning student, who should be identified immediately upon registration in order to provide the individual with services or directions to facilitate her or his persistence at the College. This conclusion is not meant to de-emphasize the responsibility of a college to assist students in the pursuit of their goals, nor is it meant to suggest a lower commitment to provide services and programs commensurate with those goals. Rather, and

beyond the questioned utility of any combination of identified predictors (DeVecchio, 1972), it seems that the community college should temper any zealous efforts to provide needed services and programs with the realization that the non-returning student may not necessarily be a negative indicator of the fulfillment of responsibilities.

Attrition does represent a loss of resources for a particular college and a potential loss, or at least postponement, of trained manpower for the society. Yet, as Hahn (1974) purports, there is not clear evidence that non-return to college is necessarily harmful for the student nor tragic in his or her career pursuits. There is no empirical justification for a claim that a completed education is a pre-condition for job security or that the non-returning student is doomed to failure in life. A community college, therefore, must continue to establish a healthy distinction between those efforts of special attention and developments of special programs to assist and encourage the student to remain within the institution and those efforts to entice the student or sell the college to the student beyond the individual's free and expressed desire to persist. And, a community college must focus more directly upon operationalizing the enrollment patterns of its students and to account for those students who do come back.

Footnotes

[1]Copies of the survey instrument and generated output are available by writing the author of this article.

[2]Eckland (1964) was the first to provide empirical evidence of the dropout who comes back to College. During the ten years after matriculation at the University of Illinois, Eckland found that 70% of the former students came back. Eckland's study however, did not focus upon the community college, particularly colleges without admissions selectivity.

[3]The number of students re-admitted is also a function of the number of successive semesters for which the tracking system operates.

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